

Documentality: the key to social ontology

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If April is the cruellest month, what about August? I am stuck in the passports' office, it's hot, there's a huge crowd (everybody is as disheartened as me) and, as if that wasn't enough, the take-a-number dispenser is broken. Then the queue is no longer governed by something put down in black and white, but only by memory. And memory of people taking part in such a rite is shaky and often overwhelmed by personal interest, so the queue becomes somewhat problematic. Now, between the issue of a passport and the regulation of a queue, there is a connection which is not only *de facto*, but *de jure*.

What I'm trying to obtain with the passport is a way of fixing memory, something that can guarantee my identity. Otherwise, I would be forced to travel with a lot of acquaintances and even with some policeman, who would be in charge of certifying my rights. And this story would never come to an end. For instance, in that world without documents, also money and credit cards would not exist, and all that travelling people should carry with them a huge amount of chattels. This fact points out the key-category of social ontology, which I propose to call *documentality*.

What is it all about? Searle, in his *The Construction of Social Reality* (1995), has formulated the law "X counts as Y in C", that means that a social object is a higher-order object supervening upon a physical object. In some context, a man is also a prime minister and a piece of paper is a banknote. So far, so good. But what should we say about negative entities, such as debts? Or about the fact that, more and more, money tends to dematerialize, being transformed into blips within the bank's computer?

That's why in my *Dove sei? Ontologia del telefonino [Where are you? Mobile Ontology]* (2005) I have proposed the alternative law "*Object = Written Act*": social objects are social acts (such that they involve at least two persons) characterized by the fact of being written: on paper, in a computer file, or simply in people's heads. There's no need of massive physical objects (a territory, a human body) in order to get a social object: in the great majority of cases what is needed is just a few molecules of ink, a blip in a computer, or a small amount of neurons.

This way, we found the necessary (but not, of course, also sufficient) condition for society: without inscriptions of some sort, even only in the head, there would be no society; on the other hand we can obviously find inscriptions without a society, such as the notches on Robinson's calendar. Moreover, the condition I have just mentioned holds specifically for social objects: physical objects, like mountains, or ideal objects, like theorems, exist without inscriptions, but social objects don't (a society without memory is, strictly speaking, unconceivable). It is in this sense that I propose to transform Derrida's thesis (untenable as it is) "There is nothing outside of the text" into "There is nothing *social* outside of the text".

With all this in place, a theory of documentality can develop in three different directions. The first direction is that of an ontology, which has to answer the question "What is a document?". The second one is that of a technology, whose task is to explain how documents are distributed within a complex society. The last direction is that of a pragmatics (especially legal pragmatics), whose aim is to guarantee an efficient distribution of documents in today's society, characterized as it is by the explosion of writing.

1. Ontology. With regard to the first question – what is a document? – what is needed is a full articulation of the law "*Object = Written Act*". Documentality, in fact, embraces a large

domain: from human memory and simple written notes (memos don't have necessarily a social value, but often they acquire one) to international treaties. Moreover, documents can be realized by quite different media (writing on paper, electronic writing, photography...) and they can refer to quite different events and activities (borrowing a book from the library, getting married, giving a name to a child, declaring war...). In the great majority of these realizations, the structure of documentality can be recognized: first of all, a physical support; then an inscription which is, of course, smaller than the physical support but which determines its social value; finally, something idiomatic, typically a signature (and its various variants, such as digital signatures and PIN codes), which guarantee the authenticity of the document.

2. Technology. As to the second question – how is documentality distributed within a complex society? – the queue at the office that I have described doesn't represent an optimal situation, but, luckily, the number of media suitable for the realization of documentality is now increasing: you can pay fines at the tobacco store, pay for parking by mobile phone, buy tickets or pay taxes on-line. In short: if it's true that an advanced society has more needs with regard to documentality, it's true, by the same token, that such a society has more resources, made available by digital supports and technologies (which extend and potentiate the law "Object = Written Act") for paying bills and taxes, getting certificates, making online purchases and financial transactions.

3. Pragmatics. Let's turn, finally, to the third question. How can we manage documents in a world characterized by the explosion of writing? The problems related to privacy, constantly increasing in advanced societies, are usually interpreted in the light of the recurrent image of a Big Brother, that is, a big watching eye, according to the model of Bentham's Panopticon. On one hand, it's surely true that things like infrared viewers are nowadays widespread as well as cameras that constantly survey every aspect of our lives, in banks, stations, supermarkets, offices and private buildings. On the other hand, however, the power of this big eye would be useless without a registration, which is exactly what transforms a vision in a document. No doubt, the recent debates about phone interceptions are just the tip of an iceberg: the question we are facing here is an important one for democracy, and a complete grasp of the category of documentality is required in order to get a satisfactory answer to it.